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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002906

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SUBJECT: JAM CREATES CRISIS IN KARBALA, HITS BADR IN BAGHDAD

REF: BAGHDAD CLASS O/I - AUGUST 28 (CLASHES IN KARBALA)

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller. Reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

[11](#). (U) This is a joint Embassy Baghdad - PRT Karbala report.

[12](#). (C) Summary: Three days of internecine Shi'a violence that began August 27 with a thwarted attempt by elements of Moqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia to seize one of Shi'a Islam's holiest shrines in Karbala and morphed into ongoing attacks by JAM against the Islamic Supreme Council (ISCI) and its Badr militia in Baghdad and several southern provinces have left at least 49 people dead and nearly 300 injured. Karbala is reportedly quiet but tense after the August 28 arrival of the Iraqi Army and an August 29 visit by Prime Minister al-Maliki, who has already drawn criticism for the slow and uneven response of GOI security forces to the violence. A senior ISCI advisor refused to characterize the JAM attacks as the beginning of all-out conflict between al-Sadr forces and ISCI/Badr, claiming that Badr was engaged only in defensive operations, but predicted that al-Sadr and JAM will lose considerable support and prestige among Iraqi Shi'a as a result of JAM's murder of fellow Shi'a Muslims at a holy shrine on the occasion of a sacred religious festival. Perhaps mindful of this potential public relations disaster, al-Sadr's office in Najaf reportedly issued a statement in his name calling for JAM to suspend operations for six months and ordering its restructure. End Summary.

JAM Runs Amok, First in Karbala(  
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[13](#). (C) All available information suggests that the August 27-28 violence in Karbala stemmed from a planned, coordinated attempt by JAM to forcibly seize one of Shi'a Islam's most sacred sites at the height of an annual Shi'a pilgrimage to celebrate the birth of the Imam Mahdi, or "Hidden" Imam. The trouble reportedly began August 27 at a security checkpoint in front of the shrine complex when Iraqi police attempted to prevent JAM cadres from toting weapons into the area, which led to a firefight between JAM gunmen and Iraqi police backed by the Protection Force of the Holy Shrines (affiliated with Shi'a Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani). Sporadic but heavy skirmishes ensued on August 28 in which JAM burned all six checkpoints leading to the shrine complex and temporarily seized control of the area from the Iraqi police. The east minaret and some of the decorative gold work of the Imam Hussein mosque, one of Shi'a Islam's holiest shrines, received damage from gunfire during the clashes. Numerous cars and several buildings were reportedly burned in the melee. The Karbala government imposed a curfew and closed the shrine complex to visitors, thus effectively ending the pilgrimage and leaving pilgrims to scramble to find transportation out of Karbala. Media reports estimate the

number of dead at 42 and the number of wounded at 282, including many innocent pilgrims who were trying to perform religious rites.

¶4. (C) PRT Karbala contacted Gen. Abdul Amir, commander of IA forces in Karbala, who said he was ordered to enter the city at approximately 2000 on August 28 by Gen. Othman, commander of the 8th Division of the Iraqi Army. Amir said that the Iraqi police had completely deserted their posts and JAM controlled the area around the Imam Hussein shrine. Pilgrims were trapped in the surrounding streets and unable to flee the area. He confirmed reports of widespread looting and added that JAM stole hundreds of cell phones that were earlier collected at the checkpoints from pilgrims entering the shrines. Amir said that his forces arrested Hamid Ghanush (PC Member, Sadr), believed to be the leader of the operation, after killing several of his bodyguards (Comment: OMS is criticizing PM Maliki in media statements for authorizing the arrest and claims that Ghanush was beaten after being arrested. PRT Karbala has reason to believe Ghanush was involved in the recent assassination of an Iraqi national working for the PRT. End Comment). Amir added that after his forces took control of the mosques, they discovered several gunmen rigging the Imam Hussein mosque with explosives. The IA engaged the gunmen and thwarted the sabotage attempt, and Amir speculated that the saboteurs were Al Qaeda operatives taking advantage of the chaos to try to demolish the mosque.

¶5. (SBU) Arabic media and PRT contacts report that the situation in Karbala is quiet but tense following the arrival of the Iraqi Army late on August 28 and an August 29 visit by PM al-Maliki, who was accompanied by National Security Advisor al-Rubai and Defense Minister Abdul Qadir Jassim.

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After meeting with the Karbala Governor and other officials, al-Maliki relieved Gen. Salih al-Maliki, the officer responsible for Karbala's security, of his command and fired 1,500 members of the Karbala Iraqi Police for desertion. He also ordered the Iraqi Army to assume responsibility for guarding the shrines and authorized the creation of a new government force to regulate the movement of pilgrims to Karbala and ensure their safety. Although the mosques are open as of August 29, a curfew has been in place in the city since 1100.

(And Later in Baghdad and Elsewhere  
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¶6. (C) Senior Iraqi Islamic Supreme Council (ISCI) Advisor Haitham al-Husseini told us that JAM elements attacked at least 12 offices and facilities belonging to ISCI and its Badr militia on August 28, and the attacks have continued intermittently throughout August 29. JAM has attacked several branch ISCI/Badr offices in the Baghdad area as well as offices in Kut, Hillah, Diwaniyah, and Najaf provinces, leaving 7 ISCI/Badr members dead and 12 wounded. He opined that JAM's motive behind the attacks was to confuse the Shi'a masses into thinking that the Karbala violence stemmed from JAM-Badr rivalry rather than "a criminal organization attacking the Government of Iraq security forces." He believed that most Shi'a would see through JAM's ruse. Al-Husseini refused to characterize the JAM attacks as the beginning of all-out conflict between al-Sadr forces and ISCI/Badr, claiming that Badr was engaged only in defensive operations. He was bitterly critical of a "weak" GOI security response to the JAM attacks, stating the GOI had been slow to respond to calls for help from besieged ISCI/Badr offices and in some cases did not respond at all, an issue raised by ISCI's acting leader 'Amar al-Hakeem with PM al-Maliki.

Public Image Damage Control?  
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¶7. (C) ISCI's al-Husseini predicted that al-Sadr and JAM will lose considerable support and prestige among Iraqi Shi'a as a result of JAM's murder of fellow Shi'a Muslims near a holy shrine on the occasion of a sacred religious festival. Perhaps mindful of this public image danger, al-Sadr's office in Najaf reportedly issued a statement in his name calling for JAM to suspend operations for six months and ordering its restructure. When asked for a reaction, ISCI's al-Husseini noted wryly that the word had apparently not been passed down to al-Sadr's JAM fighters, as JAM attacks - including the reported clearing of an ISCI-affiliated hospital in the Baghdad suburb of Habibiyah by armed JAM fighters - had not abated.

¶8. (C) Comment: The violence in Karbala and elsewhere is one piece of a larger effort by JAM to challenge the authority of ISCI and the Najaf religious establishment throughout southern Iraq. In the case of Karbala, the goals were likely twofold: seize control of the mosques, as well as all revenue generated by pilgrims visiting the shrines, while demonstrating the inability of the Iraqi Security Forces and the Iraqi government to govern the city during the annual religious festival. Amir's report of saboteurs, if true, means that a major ethno-sectarian attack was narrowly averted. End Comment.  
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